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ABSTRACT

Communication theory and rhetorical theory engage in essentially the same endeavor, that of investigating the transfer of symbolic messages between human beings. The difference between the two disciplines is largely one of focus, a philosophical versus a scientific emphasis. Historically, suggestions for integrating rhetoric and communication theory have failed to recognize these divergent focuses and have assumed a common outlook between the two areas that ultimately repressed fruitful argument, analysis, and synthesis. Paradoxically, an integration of the theories begins at the point of difference, if communication theorists and rhetorical theorists are to work together in exploring the symbolic transfer of human messages and in expanding the possible explanations of human behavior. (MAI)

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Knowing at the Interface

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Knowing at the Interface

The discipline of speech communication is hampered by a conflict of wills between two fundamental world perspectives each with claims of its values and justification of its legitimacy. Despite the changes in both rhetorical and communication theory over the past twenty years, the roles that these world perspectives shall play remains a point of argument within the discipline. Rhetorical theory is no longer an area ruled by Aristotelian precepts. It has been reconceptualized to fit a modern emphasis on communication in a broad sense, rather than limiting itself to public address. Communication theory is not an exclusively laboratory bound science. Greater stress has been placed on the necessity of observing communication behaviors in naturalistic settings where the effects of observation on the outcome of the study are minimized. The changes in both areas have increased the probability of fruitful interaction across the interface.

In the area of rhetorical theory, there have been some constructive suggestions, toward bridging the gap in the discipline. John Waite Bowers suggests that rhetorical concerns should be directed toward the formulation of general hypothetical statements which could then be tested for validity by experimental communicologists.[1] While supporting this view, Wayne Brockreide views another function of rhetorical theory as one validating the results of experimentation by testing "the explanatory and predictive power of a theory in the real world of historical and contemporary rhetorical transactions."[2] At the opposite end of the attitude scale, Edwin Black has articulated the proposition that rhetorical and communication theory exist in very different realms of substance and method. Assigning rhetorical theory

to a study of the generic history of rhetorical discourse and communication theory to the study of the historically mutable present-day patterns of message transaction, Professor Black went as far as to say that the areas of rhetorical theory and communication theory are "adjacent but mutually exclusive."[3]

Each of the above statements seek to delineate the legitimate areas of concern for rhetorical and communication theory. Each of the above statements also ignore recent attacks on the viability of scientific rationalism and assume a direct grafe of rhetorical theory onto the present practice of communication theory, not in a direct relationship, but in a relationship that calls for tangential contact at the point of the interface. This paper will attempt to demonstrate that the crisis in scientific rationalism and epistemology points the way for a direct and fruitful relationship across the interface between rhetorical and communication theory. First, it will be necessary to examine the crisis in scientific epistemology that has erupted in the past twenty years and, then, posit a relationship that is designed to circumnavigate the crisis.

I

Communication theory and rhetorical theory are engaged in essentially the same enterprise, the investigation of the transfer of symbolic messages between human beings. The appropriation of the term "communication" by the experimentalists has often confused this point by prompting a rear guard action in defense of the term "rhetoric" - a battle that often involves pride rather than any substantive intellectual issue. There are few problems of communication that a rhetorician or communicologist is barred from investigating given a sensitive use of methodology,

that is, a selection of method suited to the nature of the problem investigated. The difference between the areas is largely one of focus, a philosophical versus a scientific emphasis or, as Lawrence Rosenfield expressed it, a concern with "behavior" versus a concern with "human experience."[4] With the disagreements over the benefits and validity of philosophical or scientific approaches, the real problem of how we come to know the world becomes obscurred. The search for an approach to investigating the phenomena of concern to the speech communication discipline procedes without taking these problems into full and careful consideration.

The Winter 1977 issue of Communication Quarterly was devoted to a symposium searching for an over-arching theoretical perspective for speech communication. In the lead article of that journal, W. Barnett Pearce argues for the necessity of such a basic theoretical framework for the investigation of communication phenomena.[5] The concept of such an over-arching and generative theory of research contains the phenomenological assumption that there exists an objective and observable universe containing "truths" and "facts" which may, in a real sense, be apprehended and understood. Professor Pearce acknowledges, but lightly dismisses, the objection that all observation is "theory laden" by stating that the researcher "must be able to articulate his own assumptions and alternatives to them."[6] This general prescriptive formula fails to go far enough to reveal the root of the problem, for the problem is often hidden within the researcher in the form of the epistemology contained in the theories that the researcher holds. This is a point that Professor Pearce fails to adequately grasp - it is difficult for the person who holds a set of assumptions to recognize them as assumptions and not "irrefutable truths" or "undeniable realities." In order to fully clarify this objection, the concept of "natural interpretations" advanced by Paul Feyerebend

will be examined.

Feyerabend begins his thesis with the idea that the enterprise of science is one which procedes by argumentation, persuasion, and dogma, despite the idealistic tendency of the field to view itself as a form of non-persuasive, rational discourse. In this respect, his book Against Method is a form of rhetorical analysis. Theories, according to Feyerabend are constructions of the human mind designed to organize perceptual experience through a conceptual framework. When a theory gains wide professional acceptance in the community of science and rises to the status of an over-arching theoretical perspective, alternative perspectives and theories are closed off and theory is in danger of becoming dogma.[7] Further, an over-arching theoretical perspective that has been widely accepted can melt into and become embedded in the observation language used to describe phenomena. This process can contaminate the observations of researchers in subtle ways, adding to problems of observation that are presented by individual personality traits and cultural heritage. The influence of theory on the basic process of observation results in "natural interpretations," Feyerabend defined these as, "ideas so closely connected with observation that it needs a special effort to realize their existence and to determine their context."[8] In short, the theoretical assumptions held by an observer can condition what will be observed.

Feyerabend's analysis considered Galileo's problems of legitimizing the Copernican, heliocentric universe as one of a struggle to overcome a set of geocentric natural interpretations. According to the assumptions of the geocentric theory, the earth did not move. If the earth moved, according to the reasoning of this theory, an iron ball could not possibly fall straight down the side of a tower. Because of an assumption of independent motion of objects, it must

describe an arc and fall a distance from the base of the tower proportionate to the speed of the earth's movement. The task set before Galileo was to defeat the natural interpretations residing in the observers of the free-falling iron ball. He could not support his hypothesis of the shared motion of the ball and the earth by appealing to experiment and independent observation because of those natural interpretations. Those who accepted geocentrism literally saw different results and Galileo had to support his hypothesis by persuasive discourse designed to subvert the old system of natural interpretations.[9] Because of the relationship between theory and observation, Galileo was forced to become a rhetorician rather than a scientist in the ideal sense of that term which requires validation of a hypothesis through experimentation. Feyerabend concluded from this analysis that what was necessary for a proper test of the heliocentric hypothesis was "an entirely new view of man and his capacities of knowing,"[10] which was something the scientific method could not deliver.

As in the case of Galileo, any alternative explanation of phenomena has the risk of being stifled or obscurred by views of sensation and perception that are carried along with the world view of any theoretical construction. This loss of alternatives can obscure the problems of knowing in observing the universe and result in a loss of imaginative possibilities in explaining phenomena. As an over-arching theoretical perspective is assimilated deep into the consciousness of a discipline, the process of education under its penumbra can become a rigidifying and dehumanizing process. Feyeraband criticizes this process as it operates in the physical sciences:

> Scientific education simplifies "science" by simplifying its participants: first, a domain of research is defined. The domain is separated from the rest of history (physics, for example, is separated from metaphysics and from theology) and given a "logic of its own. A thorough training in such a logic then conditions those working in the domain; it makes their actions more uniform and it freezes large parts of the historical process as well. Stable "facts" arise and persevere despite the vicissitudes of history. An essential part of the training

> that makes such fact appear consists in the attempt to inhibit intuitions that might lead to a blurring of boundaries. A person's religion, for example, or his metaphysics must not have the slightest connection with his scientific activity. His imagination is restrained, and even his language ceases to be his own. This is again reflected in the nature of scientific "facts" which are experienced as being independent of opinion, belief, and cultural background.[11]

This description has much in common with the perceptual limitations which Kenneth Burke termed as "occupational psychosis," a way of perceiving conditioned by how one is trained to see and what one is looking for.[12] Further, it describes a process by which the human is taken out of observation, which may very well be impossible.

The problems associated with the interaction of theory and observation are magnified in the social and human sciences. Feyerabend notes the importance of cultural, historical, and psychological factors in the growth of the physical sciences.[13] Other historicans of science increasingly take note of the effects of surrounding events on scientific research. Lewis Fueur, for example, describes Ernst Mach's proofs of his critique of absolute space and time (which was a precursor to Einstein's theory of relativity) as weak. The social climate in Zurich at the turn of the century, however, was ripe for the overthrow of conceptual absolutes.[14] In the social sciences, these historical, political, factors gain even more importance because the objects of study, as well as the researchers, are influenced by these factors.

An excellent example of how this point can be missed is seen in Michael Polanyi's critique of the research done on the causes of the Hungarian revolution. The social research excluded the possibility of value laden action by those who revolted against the Soviet hegemony. Economic factors, historical background,

and political power analyses were all brought relentlessly to bear on the explanation of the causes of the uprising. As Polanyi notes, however, none of the researchers took seriously the statements of those at the forefront of the rebellion that they revolted because they acted to secure what was "right". The value-free assumptions of scientific rationalism blinded the researchers to alternative motives for action that simply did not exist within the framework of the theory. The dangers of dehumanization of such an objective treatment of human actions was formulated by Polanyi into a personal-professional dilema:

> If the social scientist can explain all human actions by value-free observations, then none of his own actions can be motivated by moral values. Either he exempts himself from his own theory of human motivation, or he must conclude that all references to moral values - or any other values - are meaningless.[15]

The dilema contains points in common with Feyerabend's description of education in the science quoted above. Both Polanyi and Feyerabend see this phenomenon occuring as a result of the assumption of scientific rationalism, and both see the result of this as a dehumanization of observer and observed contaminating the utility and value of the results of scientific method. Polanyi reverses his above dilema, approaching it from the other end, to point out a contradiction in the assumption of the objective observer. If the scientist admits to making value judgments in personal life (or that they exist), then the claim that all human actions can be explained without any reference to moral judgment has been denied.

The problem of the interpretation of human action exists for the social scientist within the object of study (in that people inevitably interpret situations idiosyncratically) as well as within the researcher. Thus Feyerabend's objection to the assumptions of objectivity implicit in the epistemology of the

physical sciences must be increased geometrically in the social sciences. The physical sciences, at least, do not involve themselves with the study of conscious and motivated objects.

II

The social sciences and communication theory, taken as part of the social sciences, are still in their infancy. In communication theory, there are no over-arching theoretical perspective threatening to close off alternatives to the explanation of phenomena, but the search for such a theoretical perspective is being conducted as in the Winter 1977 issue of Communication Quarterly cited above. The critique of scientific rationalism presented in the first part of this paper should not be construed as a rejection of any kind of systematic theory in speech communication. Theory is necessary as an organizing principle for experience and observation. Even the arch-anarchist Paul Feyerabend admits:

> Learning does not go from observation to theory but always involves both elements. Experience arises together with assumptions not before them, and an experience without theory is just as incomprehensible as is a theory without experience.[16]

It will be noted that Feyerabend does not fail to recognize the inevitability and utility of theory, but that he recognizes a further responsibility to conduct research into how observation occurs and to understand that there is no situation where observation exists without an organizing principle, either explicit or implicit.

With such a view of the rational scientific enterprise emerging, the direction of research in rhetorical theory toward questions involving the "rhetoric of science" and the process of message transfer in the scientific community becomes a fertile area of exploration. Such investigations are

indeed being conducted. For example, Phillip Wander's description of specific persuasive methods, such as the use of ethos, in the scientific community,[17] or John Angus Campbell's rhetorical analysis of the writings of Charles Darwin.[18] This line of investigation should also, however, be directed inward toward the social sciences and speech communication in particular. Rhetorical theory can be one means of investigating the process of scientific rhetoric in the communication sciences. The rhetoric of the research can be sifted for hidden assumptions and the implications that a particular theoretical orientation holds, just as Edwin Black accomplished this end within the area of rhetorical theory with his criticism of the assumptions of the Aristolelian perspective.[19] This area of integration between rhetorical theory and communication theory would be designed to challenge the epistemological assumptions within the research in speech.

Although great problems concerning the "theory laden" researcher remain, Jesse Delia's constructivist approach to the study of communication offers a method by which researchers can take into account the world view of the objects of study:

> The primary task for a constructivist theory of social communication is to provide an explication of behavior in terms of shared knowledge, the linguistic system, and the individual interpretive process by which the perspective of the group or other is represented as part of each interactant's cognitive organization of the social event.[20]

The specific methods of this approach to experimentation are as yet unclear, but the possibility exists for co-action between rhetorical theorists and communication theorists. The constructivist perspective of experiment implies the use of rhetorical analysis of the linguistic systems and network of shared terms within social systems or individuals under observation in order to under-

stand the principles of conceptual organization employed by these people. This is one specific instance of an area of possible integration. On a more general level, rhetorical theory can aid in tempering the value-free assumptions of scientific method and help in avoiding the pitfalls that the physical sciences have met.

This process of unearthing assumptions applies to methodology as well as to theory, for the implicit notions of a theory will be built in to any analytical or experimental tools. Rhetorical theory has, in recent years, opened itself to alternative analytical methods. In their description of the "experiential perspective." Robert Scott and Bernard Brock posit a close relationship between a critic and the problem to be investigated, without the obstrusive intervention of a particular methodology:

> An infinite number of concepts, strategies, and perspectives are available for the study of the rhetorical act; and a close interaction between the critic and act itself is necessary for the selection of the correct concepts, strategies, and perspectives for criticism. As the world is in a state of process, so is rhetorical theory.[21]

Again, theory and methodology are not being denied significance as organizing principles for observation, but they should not become ends themselves creating an atmosphere of concern for proper procedure rather than insightful explanations of communication events. Methodology should be means of collecting data that "respects the pretheoretical meaningfulness of the human social world."[22] As a means of discovery in the universe of human behavior, methodologies must be sensitive to the context of social behavior as an interpretative process in a world not of hard "facts" but of elusive motives for action. The use of the term "pretheoretical meaningfulness" above was employed by Delia and Grossberg to remind researchers that actors in a social situation

might interpret that situation far differently than they, and that they act from those individual interpretations, not from the researchers's assumption. Methodologies are capable of carrying their own "unexplicited notions of man, social order and rationality"[23] which can blind investigators to possibilities of explanation. A semantic differential cannot supply the interpretations a subject employed in marking his response and may even manipulate him or her into certain channelized responses. For an example from rhetorical methodology, consider the difficulties of a rhetorical critic who attempts to explicate the rhetoric of radicals using the framework of Aristolelian logos.

Another difficulty with methodologies is their use as persuasive tools. When methodologies are twisted toward persuasive purposes, their hidden assumptions and relevance to the problem are more likely to remain unexamined. B. Aubrey Fisher has cautioned that methodology in the communication sciences can become a weapon in argumentative struggles for the acceptance of ideas in a discipline, judging evidence not for "its theoretical contribution, but on the basis of its similarity with popular research practices."[24] The assumptions that lie behind methodologies, as well as theories, might, then, be suggested as an additional area of a co-operative synthesis between rhetorical and communication theorists.

In the view of the pitfalls that one can encounter with the arrival of an over-arching theoretical perspective that have been outlined above, the dominance of any particular viewpoint in as diverse a field as speech communication should be approached with caution if at all. The phenomena of human communication are open to a wide variety of observer interpretations and we should not be too eager to limit the range of explanatory possibilities. If rhetorical theory and communication theory can be viewed as two competing modes of explanation,

the difference in focus that exists between these perspectives should be used co-operatively to check the assumptions and implications that each hold. A healthy co-existence of these two basic perspectives would prevent the formation of a rigid orthodoxy of general theory and methods in the study of communication which would ultimately have the effect of hampering the process of observation and the possibilities of explanation. An over-arching theoretical perspective of communication is not as necessary as are theories at a less universal level of generalization which serve to organize and direct research toward a particular phenomenon, such as ethos, or a limited range of related phenomena, such as patterns of radical rhetoric. By perserving plurality of viewpoint, the discipline is in far less danger of falling into the illusion that mistakes man-made laws of behavior for explanations of phenomena.

III

This paper suggested that rhetorical theory and communication theory could find great mutual advantage in co-operating to challenge the assumptions residing within communication theories and methodologies. In the past, suggestions for integration have all too often failed to realize that the difference in focus between rhetorical and communication theory could be exploited rather than eliminated. While suggestions that rhetorical theory can formulate hypothesis for experimental testing or validate experimental findings in the real world are useful, they assume a common outlook between the areas of communication theory and rhetorical theory, a rigid orthodoxy of viewpoint that might ultimately oppress fruitful argument, analysis, and synthesis between divergent viewpoints that exist in each area.

The very nature of observation as a "theory laden" process contains fertile fields of investigation. Indeed, this question of "knowing" is essential for

communication theory and rhetorical theory. The problems of scientific rationalism as a way of knowing are compounded tremendously when they are transferred from the physical sciences to the human sciences. The area of integration between rhetorical and communication theory should start from this point in order to meet the crisis of knowledge rather than avoid it. As researchers of the consumate human activity, the symbolic transfer of messages, communication theorists and rhetorical theorists must work together to expand the possibilities of the explanation of human behavior, not limit them. It may seem a paradox, but we must retain the differences between the areas in order to find a higher synthesis and wider, truer perspective.

FOOTNOTES

1. John Waite Bowers, "The Pre-Scientific Function of Rhetorical Criticism" in Essays on Rhetoric Criticism, ed. by Thomas Nilsen, (N.Y.: Random House, Inc. 1968).

2. Wayne Brockreide, "Trends in Rhetoric: The Blending of Criticism and Science" in The Prospect of Rhetoric, ed. by Lloyd Bitzer and Edwin Black (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, Inc., 1971) p. 36.

3. Edwin Black, "The Mutability of Rhetoric," address at the University of Denver Interface Seminar, Fall, 1975. Tapes available through SCA.

4. Lawrence Rosenfield, "An Autopsy of the Rhetorical Tradition," in The Prospect of Rhetoric, ed. by Lloyd Bitzer and Edwin Black, (Englewoods Cliffs: Prentice Hall, Inc., 1971) p. 73-74.

5. W. Barnett Pearce, "Metatheoretical Concerns in Communication," Communication Quarterly, 25 Winter, 1977) pp. 3-6.

6. Pearce, p.5.

7. Paul Feyerabend, Against Method, (London: New Left Books, 1975) pp. 43-44.

8. Feyerabend, p. 69.

9. Feyerabend, p. 90-91.

10. Feyerabend, p. 152.

11. Feyerabend, p. 19.

12. Kenneth Burke, Permanence and Change, (N.Y.: Bobbs-Merrill Co., 1954) p. 52-53.

13. Feyerabend, p. 154-155.

14. Lewis Feuer, Einstein and the Generations of Science, (N.Y.: Basic Books, 1974), p.53.

15. Michael Polyani, "The Message of the Hungarian Revolution." in Knowing and Being, ed. by Marjorie Grene (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969), p. 34.

16. Feyerabend, p. 168.

17. Phillip Wander, "The Rhetoric of Science," Western Speech, XL (Fall, 1976) p. 226-235.

18. John Angus Campbell, "The Polemical Mr. Darwin", QJS, 61 (December 1975) p. 375-390.

19. Edwin Black, Rhetorical Criticism: A Study in Method, (N.Y.: Macmillan and Co., 1965).

20. Jesse Delia, "Constructivism and the Study of Human Communication", QJS, 63 (February, 1977) p.71.

21. Robert Scott and Bernard Brock, Methods of Rhetorical Criticism: A Twentieth Century Perspective, (N.Y.: Harper and Row, 1972) p. 125.

22. Jesse Delia and Lawrence Grossberg, "Interpretation and Evidence," Western Speech, 41, (Winter, 1977), p. 37.

23. Michael Phillipson, "Theory, Methodology and Conceptualization," in New Directions in Sociological Theory, ed., by Paul Filmer, et. al. (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1973) p. 96.

24. B. Aubrey Fisher, "Evidence Varies with Theoretical Perspective." Western Speech, 41 (Winter, 1977) p. 18.